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UN Slaps Berlin on the Wrist**German Schools Perpetuate Inequality Report Says**

The German education system is in trouble, says the United Nations. The country's three-tiered structure perpetuates social inequalities a new report argues.



DPA

The UN says that children with immigrant backgrounds are not well served by the German education system.

It's bad enough that Germany's schoolchildren turn in only mediocre scores on the triennial Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development study which compares school achievements among developed countries. The disappointing results regularly spark off national debates about the state of the German school system. Now, though, the issue has graduated to the international stage.

Vernor Muñoz Villalobos, the Special Rapporteur on education issues for the Commission on Human Rights, presented his assessment of education in Germany on Wednesday in Geneva. And it wasn't favorable. He was very critical of the country's three-tier school system calling it discriminatory against immigrant children, those from poor families and the disabled.

"I believe that the three-tier system and the type of student selection foster social inequalities," he said. His findings were based on a visit to the country last year.

In Germany, school children are divided into different types of high school depending on their performance at primary school, which runs until the 5th or 6th year, depending on which German state they live in. Upon their teacher's recommendation, they continue their education either at the top-tier *Gymnasium*, which allows them to go to university afterwards, the more vocationally oriented *Realschule*, or the bottom-tier *Hauptschule*.

In international comparison, this "atypical" early selection carries with it strong disadvantages for children with migrant, low-income or disabled backgrounds, says Villalobos. Language or developmental deficiencies play an inordinate role in the children's recommendation as primary-school is too short to allow children to adequately compensate for their backgrounds, he argued. Instead, those differences are augmented when students attend different types of schools. Inequalities are thus perpetuated, Villalobos argued.

"Germany should reform its education system in such a way that it keeps its advantages -- like the high degree of school attendance -- while overcoming its inequality and the lack of equal opportunities," the UN representative said. He also referred to the PISA study which found the relation between social class and school achievement that in Germany is stronger than anywhere else in the developed world.

German politicians were not pleased by Villalobos's report. The Conference of Ministers for the Education and the Arts accused Villalobos of painting a distorted picture of the country's education system. The German employers association also criticized Villalobos for not considering recent improvements made in education quality and equal opportunities.

But not everyone was critical of the report. Claudia Roth, a co-chair of the Green Party felt the UN Human Rights Council was right to pillory Germany. "We have one of the most unfair education systems out of all developed countries," she said.

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